

## **Things Couldn't Be Stranger** by [juliataillard](#)

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**Summary:** Darcy Henderson's life has always been a bit strange due to being the older sister of the toothless weirdo, Dustin, and the best friend of the school loner, Jonathan Byers. But when Jonathan's little brother goes missing and a girl with a shaved head suddenly shows up? Things couldn't be stranger.

## 1. The Vanishing of Will Byers

"Oh, where is he? Where is your brother?" my mother fretted, sitting in her favorite tan armchair with Mews, her precious cat, in her arms. She scratched the top of his head, constantly looking between me and the front door.

"Mom, it's not a big deal, he's at Mike's," I reassured her. I tell her this every time Dustin would come home late from one of his friends' houses. She was always so nervous whenever Dustin was late to come home. She yawned, cuddling Mews as she continued to worry out loud. "Oh, but it's a school night... He should be home, he said he'd be home by now," she said. I could tell she was exhausted; she's always exhausted.

"Go to bed," I ordered, sighing. "What, no..." she protested, yawning before she could continue. "Mom, it's late. You're tired, I'll wait up. Go to bed, I'll wait until her gets home and I'll take him to school in the morning," I told her. She started to tell me no, but she ultimately gave in as she continued to yawn. She stood up, kissed my head, and descended down the hallway to her room, still carrying Mews. She closed the door behind her softly, leaving me to wait for my brother.

Another few minutes passed and I waited, until I got up and went to the phone in the kitchen. I picked it up and began dialing, pressing the numbers to call the Wheeler's house. It rang a few times before the line was picked up.

"Hello?" a breathless voice answered that I recognized instantly. I cursed to myself before speaking, "Uh, hi, Nance... It's Darcy, uh, is my brother still there?" I prayed she wasn't mad at me for calling. "Oh," she said, disappointed. "Yeah, um, he just knocked on my door to offer pizza before he left, maybe twenty minutes ago? He should be home soon," she told me flatly. "God, he's so obvious. Um, alright, thanks... Has he called?" I asked, trying to make this conversation any less forced. Me and her hadn't really talked in a while; she's been more busy than usual. "Not yet, but he should soon. He normally doesn't call until later at night. It's still early for his call," she said. She was starting to warm up, but I could tell she wanted to get off the phone with me for him. "Let me know if he calls? I'll try reaching

Dustin, thanks," I said goodbye to her and hung up, glad that that was over.

I went to my school bag and pulled out the walkie-talkie that Dustin had given me years ago. It was old and battered, but still worked. I turned it on, pressed the button, and called out to Dustin. "Where are you?" I got static back until Dustin's voice yelled out, "Just passed Mirkwood. Give me ten minutes," I sighed and turned off the walkie-talkie, putting it back in my bag before slumping down on the couch in the living room. I nodded off, collapsed on the couch, waiting for him. I dozed in and out, and until I was jolted awake by his homecoming.

"Shit, shit, my bad," he apologized after he had slammed the front door. I jumped up, startled from the sudden noise before realizing it was just him. "Damn, Dustin," I breathed out. He half smiled, before launching into how his Dungeons and Dragon campaign with his friends had gone. He talked about how it took all day and they were suddenly attacked by a Demogorgon when Mike's mom told them to finally go home.

"Look, you know Mom worries. Stop being so late, I'm sick of staying up for you and having to take to you school the next day," I complained, interrupting him. "Wait, why do you have to take me to school? That's totally lame, Nancy doesn't take Mike to school!" he argued. "Jonathan takes Will to school all the time, it's no big deal. And if you stop being late, I won't have to take you into school," I said. I ruffled his hair before turning away and going to my room. I pulled my curly hair back into a ponytail, the lights flickering for a moment as I brushed my hair. I shrugged, took my glasses off, and climbed into bed before falling asleep for the night.

I woke up to my alarm, still exhausted from the night before. Staying up to wait for my constantly late brother meant I am never getting enough sleep. I couldn't help but send him dirty looks as I passed him to go to the bathroom. I pulled at the bags under my eyes as I looked in the mirror, wishing them away before beginning to get ready.

Forty-five minutes later, I went to kitchen made up, hair done, and dressed. I flipped Dustin's hat off his head as I passed him eating breakfast at the table, grabbing a slice of toast off of his plate. "Hey!"

he said as I took a bite. I rolled my eyes at him and grabbed my bag. "Let's go," I said with my mouth full, opening the kitchen door. He grabbed his last slice of toast and stuffed it into his mouth, put the plate in the sink, put his backpack on, and headed out the door. "You don't have to ride with me," he tried, but I sent him another dirty look before we got on our bikes. We rode down the driveway and on the road, heading to school.

After meeting with Mike and Lucas, two of Dustin's best friends, we reached the school parking lot. Normally, his other friend, Will, would join us, but sometimes he rode in with his older brother, Jonathan, who drove. However, I didn't see Jonathan's rusted Ford sedan in its usual spot. He never missed school; neither did Will.

"Are they late?" Dustin asked.

"No, they're never late," Mike said, shaking his head.

"They've been late!" Dustin argued.

"When have they *ever* been late?" Mike countered.

"Then, where are they?" Lucas asked. We were all silent for a moment until I finally spoke up.

"Look, get to class. Joyce might have dropped Will off or something. I'll look into it, just don't be late," I told them, shooing them away. They went off in the direction of the middle school, while I rode towards the high school. I pulled up to the payphones, leaning my bike against me as I entered a few coins and began dialing. The phone had barely rung when Joyce picked up, out of breath,

"Will? Sweetie?" she immediately asked. Something was definitely wrong.

"No, is everything okay? Where's Will? Where's Jonathan?" I questioned her. I could hear her inhale sharply when I spoke, upset that it wasn't Will. "Darcy, sweetie, was Will at school?" her voice attempting to be hopeful. "Not that I saw, is everything okay?" I asked again. I heard the phone drop and Joyce's voice was far away. Then, Jonathan was speaking into the phone, "Darcy, look, we can't

find Will and-

"Shit, are you guys okay?" I interrupted. He started to talk but I interrupted again. "Obviously, you're not. You guys are obviously not okay. Um, I'm coming over," I decided. "Darcy, no-" he protested, but I hung the phone up on him. I got on my bike again and headed the same way I had just came from, but this time, towards the Byers' house.

I reached their house and was greeted with Joyce gone and Jonathan pacing on the front porch. "You don't have to be here," he immediately said when he noticed me. "Okay, and?" I scoffed, pulling him into a hug. "He's missing?" I asked, my voice muffled from his shoulder blocking my face. "I don't know, Mom went to the police. She left after you called. I just, I don't know what to do," he rambled, pulling out of the hug and walking inside. I followed him in, stopping to pet their dog as he ran up to me.

"You should be in school," he said again. He sat down on the couch and put his head in his hands for a moment until he looked back up at me. "Seriously, you shouldn't be skipping," he repeated. "Jonathan, I have yet to miss a day of school in all of high school so far. I think that I'm allowed to miss a day, especially for something like this," I told him, sitting down next to him. "Screw perfect attendance," I added, laughing softly. He smiled weakly at me and grabbed my hand. Without looking at me, he quietly uttered, "Thanks," under his breath. We sat there for a little while, him just holding my hand. This wasn't the norm for us, holding hands or hugging, but his brother was missing; nothing was the norm right now.

We heard a car pull up outside and then turn off. A moment later, Joyce stormed into the house, talking to herself. "Ninety nine out of a hundred times, screw you, Hopper!" she kept repeating. "Mom, what happened?" Jonathan asked, jumping up from the couch. He went over to her and followed her when she headed to the kitchen. I got up as well and joined them.

"Hopper! He thinks Lonnie has Will! He hasn't seen him in over a year and yet he suddenly has Will? God!" she shouted. "What, your dad?" I asked. I had never met Will and Jonathan's dad before, but I had never heard good things about him. Joyce threw her purse on the

table, stood in place for a minute, and then headed out the back door, me and Jonathan in tow.

"He really thinks Will is with Lonnie?" Jonathan asked. Joyce scoffed as she nodded while going through the backyard, past the shed, and into the woods behind their house. We all walked through the woods until we reached Castle Byers, the hideout Jonathan and Will had built together years before. It was made of cut up branches and blankets with painted signs on the outside. I knew Will would often spend time in there, reading comics or drawing by himself. He had let Jonathan in a few times, and even myself once on a particularly rough day.

"Maybe, maybe he's around?" Joyce softly tried. She looked inside Castle Byers but no one was inside. "Will!?" Jonathan then shouted, looking around. We all started yelling for Will, looking around. We looked for him for a while until we all accepted that he wasn't there. We went back to the house in silence, Joyce ahead of us and Jonathan barely an inch away. We got back to the house and all went inside. Joyce went to the phone and started dialing while Jonathan went over and sat down on the couch. I went and sat next to him, wrapping my arm around his.

"This is my fault," he whispered, turning to look at me. Our faces were only a few inches apart. "What? Why would you say that?" I asked.

"I worked late last night. I was supposed to be home with him, but I thought he was fine by himself for a little bit. I should've been home with him, he would've been safe then," he teared up.

"Jonathan, don't say that. Don't you dare blame yourself, it's not your fault," I put my forehead against his. I blinked away the first tears I had had all day as I grabbed his hands and squeezed them. "You're a good brother, Jonathan. You're a way better brother to Will than I am to Dustin," I told him. I could feel him shaking, his breath unequal as he softly cried over Will.

I had never been this close to him before. I cupped his face with one of my hands, tracing my thumb along his sharp jawline. I noticed the dark circles and bags under his eyes, the wrinkles in his forehead as

he scrunched his eyebrows, the shape of his lips as he kept whispering, "I'm sorry,".

Red and blue lights flashed outside, pulling me away from him. We both stood up and saw police cars outside. "Mom?" he called out, wiping his tears quickly but still holding on to my one hand. Joyce went over to the door and opened it to be met with several policemen, one of which was holding Will's bike. I could hear a quiet sound escape from Jonathan when he saw it, almost like a whimper. The three men came into the house and dropped the bike, leaning it against the wall.

"Why do you have his bike?" Joyce asked, her voice breaking. I recognized the man who had carried Will's bike as the Chief of Police, Hopper. He occasionally had come by the school for antidrug presentations.

"It was in the woods, just off the road coming here," the blond officer behind him explained. "Was Will here the night before you noticed him missing?" Hopper asked. "What? I don't know, we weren't... No," Joyce stuttered. Hopper moved past her and began looking around as he spoke. "His bike was close. He wouldn't have just left it behind," he said.

"You think I wouldn't have noticed my son if he was still here?" Joyce accused him.

"I'm not saying he's here, I'm saying he *was* here," he explained. He reached the back door; he crouched down to a chip that was in the wall. It was at level of the doorknob; the chip had clearly come from the door being opened too fast and crashing into the wall. "Was this always here?" he asked, looking at Joyce.

"I have two boys, Hopper. It's a mess, it probably-" she started. "No. It's new," I interrupted. I had been coming over for four years now. This house was a second home to me considering how much time I spent here and how many nights I slept on the couch. That chip was new.

"Wait, what?" Jonathan looked at me, surprised. Hopper stormed out the door while Joyce yelled after him. The other two policemen

began talking with Joyce and asking her questions. "How'd you know?" Jonathan asked me, still confused. "What, the chip? I, I don't know. I just know, it's new. It wasn't there but now it is," I said, unable to explain. "You're here way too much," he laughed for a moment, his eyes lighting up as everything felt normal for that millisecond. I chuckled with him too, feeling at ease for the first time since I had arrived at the house. He leaned his head against mine again, still smiling. I looked up at him, in awe of that smile. I never appreciated it before like now; maybe because I had never gone so long without seeing it.

A moment went by before Joyce, Hopper, and the policemen came back in. I hadn't even noticed that we were alone. I pulled away from Jonathan, putting a foot or two of distance between us. I heard Hopper tell the policemen to set up a search party, to gather as many people as possible.

"I can help, we can help!" I offered. I started to grab my bag and head for the door, but Hopper stood in front of it, blocking it.

"You all are staying here. You all are going to wait for Will, whether we find him or he comes here. You're staying," he told us. I started to speak, prepared to tell him no, but Joyce grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back. I looked to her and she shook her head at me. I stood down from Hopper and stepped back. He nodded his head at Joyce and went out the door. We all stood there quietly and watched the police car drive off.

"Hopper said that we, uh, we should make missing posters," Joyce said. "That's a good idea," I added. Jonathan nodded, and said "Let me, let me get some of the photo boxes," before turning and going down the hallway to his room. I followed, calling after him, "I'll help you,". I stood in the doorway as he reached into his closet, shuffling through boxes. He eventually pulled one big box out with his messy scrawl written across it saying "WILL".

"Do you have boxes of all of us?" I questioned. He half-smiled, which I knew meant yes.

"Oh, you definitely have to show me my box then!" I chased after him down the hallway. He had been taking pictures of everyone and



everything for years, so I knew he had to have a box of me, if not more than just one. He opened the lid and turned it over the coffee table, spilling its contents. Hundreds and hundreds of photos spilled out and overflowed onto the table. The three of us sat on the couch, Jonathan in the middle, and began searching through the pile of photos. We searched for the perfect one, waiting for Will to come home.

## 2. The Weirdo on Maple Street

I opened my eyes suddenly, jolted awake by the alarm clock blaring. "Shit," I grumbled, realizing it was morning. I rubbed my eyes, trying to find my bearings. I reached over and grabbed my glasses off of the nightstand and looked around, recognizing all of the posters lining the walls and the printed flag hanging over my head.

"Shit!" I said again, realizing where I was and what had happened: I spent the night in Jonathan's bed. I could feel his arm across my stomach, his still sleeping body next to me. He was starting to stir from the alarm but was still groggy and out of it. "Shit, shit, shit, shit!" I kept whispering as I attempted to carefully slip out from under his arm and out of the bed. But as I tried to get up from the edge of the mattress, I quickly stumbled and crashed to the floor.

"Crap, are you okay?" Jonathan bolted up out of the bed. He scrambled to try and help me, still only in his t-shirt from the day before and a pair of boxers. I moved away from him and began looking for my sweater from yesterday. I stuttered as I searched, finally finding it under the bed and covered in dust.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. I tried getting up, from the floor. Where I slept. But, uh, I just lost my balance or something," I badly lied. We both knew I had slept in bed with him that night, but I wasn't ready to admit it. I debated putting on the dusty sweater and averted my eyes as he pulled on his jeans from yesterday. He nodded at me and then saw my sweater.

"Here, borrow something of mine," he offered, walking over to his closet and pulling a black oversized knit sweater. I half-smiled at him as he handed it to me. I pulled it over my head, my bedhead getting even crazier. The sweater went all the way down to my knees and the sleeves fell far past my hands. He chuckled at the sight of me before he went out the door of his bedroom. I followed behind him but went into the bathroom while he went into the kitchen where Joyce was.

I left the door open a crack as I grabbed my hairbrush from under the sink and tried to attack the mess of curly brown hair that was on my head. I could hear Joyce fretting to Jonathan, but my ears perked up

at the mention my name.

"So... you and Darcy? In your room last night?" Joyce teased. Even though I couldn't see her from the bathroom, I knew she had a smirk on her face.

"Mom, stop," he whined. She had asked about us before a million times.

"I'm just saying! You've never had her sleep in your room before, I'd always wake up and see her drooling on the couch," Joyce said.

"Yeah, she slept in my bed-" he started.

"She slept in your bed?!" Joyce interrupted him. I couldn't tell if she was happy or upset about this.

"-But nothing happened! It's Darcy, Mom. She's my best friend. Let it go," he sighed. Joyce stayed quiet for a moment, not answering him at first.

"Just make sure you use protection-" she started to tell him.

"Mom!" Jonathan cried. I couldn't let this go on much longer, so I gave up on my hair and pulled it back into a messy ponytail, wiped at my smudged makeup quickly, and went into the kitchen. I coughed loudly as I walked in to make my presence known to them both.

"How are you holding up?" I asked Joyce, picking my bag up off of the kitchen chair before sitting at the table across from her. The smirk from her face now faded as she was reminded of reality.

"Um, the Xerox place opens in about thirty minutes, so you need to stop on your way to school," Joyce stumbled out, counting out money in front of her on the table. I opened up my bag and took my wallet out, ready to offer to pitch in.

"Oh, Darcy, please, no. You don't have to," Joyce tried. I ignored her and practically slammed down a twenty-dollar bill on top of her bills and coins.

"Joyce, I *want* to help. I'm helping. So, *let* me help. Okay?" I told her

firmly. The last thing they needed to worry on top of everything was money. She finally nodded and placed her hand on top of mine, squeezing it slightly.

"Jonathan and I will stop at the Xerox place and make as many posters as we possibly can. We will go to school and hang some of them up there. After school, we'll go around town and hang up the rest. Then, we'll come back here. You stay here today, okay?" I informed her, looking at Jonathan. He weakly smiled at me as I consoled Joyce. She nodded again at me and mumbled, "Thank you".

I stood up, slung my bag over my shoulder, and grabbed the money. Jonathan kissed his mother's head before he and I walked out the front door. We walked towards his car and he kept stealing glances at me.

"What?" I barked, thrown off by the staring.

"Nothing, just, um, I like your hair like that. You never wear it pulled back," he stumbled out, looking away as we got in on each side of his car. He started the engine and slowly pulled out of his spot and onto the dirt road towards town.

We went to the Xerox place and were able to afford 450 copies. We split them in half between us both and agreed to hang some up between every class. Before the first bell, we went around hanging the posters on bulletin boards. After a few minutes, we bumped into Nancy and Barb at their lockers.

"Oh, hey Darce" Barb greeted me cheerfully. She and I had only become friends recently, in the past year or so. It was the same with me and Nancy.

"Hey, um, I'll catch up with you?" I mumbled to Jonathan. He nodded and moved on down the hall, taking the pile of posters from my hands.

"Where have you been? We haven't seen you in ages," Nancy asked me. I hadn't talked to her since I called the other night looking for Dustin. That seemed like ages ago.

"Oh, well, um... Will is missing, Jonathan's brother? So I've just, like, I've just been there for him. I definitely have to go home tonight, though," I nervously laughed.

"Wait, you spent the night there?" Barb asked, confused.

"Yeah, I do that all the time? At least once a week," I told them.

"Sorry, that's just sort of different, you know? It's like Nancy having Steve sleepover last night," Barb gossiped. Nancy swatted at her arm and gasped quietly.

"He did not spend the night! He just, he came over to help me study for Chem," she blushed as she tried to defend herself.

"Which she did awesome with and is going to do awesome on!" a male voice bellowed from behind us. Suddenly, Steve Harrington along with Tommy H. and Carol were circling around and joining the three of us. Steve purposely stood close to Nancy, putting his arm up onto her locker, almost around her.

"Hey Barb, Henderson," Steve greeted us briefly before turning his attention back to Nancy, "Nance, you are going to do *amazing* on this test. You were awesome studying last night, you got this... But speaking of awesome and amazing, I'm having a small little party at my place tonight," he bragged.

"But it's Tuesday?" Barb questioned.

"*But it's Tuesday!*" Tommy H. mocked, Carol laughing into his chest. They stood as though they were super-glued together and couldn't get apart from one another.

"Look, my dad went away on a business trip and my mom doesn't trust him," Steve started.

"Naturally," Tommy H. added before Steve laughed and continued.

"This means I have the house to myself tonight. I'm having a super cool, super small party. You guys only," Steve raised his eyebrows as he spoke. "All three of you can come, not just Nancy," he quickly added.

"Wow, Harrington. Nice of you to invite us, even as an afterthought," I said, rolling my eyes.

"Look, I want Nancy there. If her friends come too, it's worth it," he flirted with Nancy. I tried to hold my vomit back at them before I answered him.

"That's real sweet, Harrington. But I already have plans tonight," I told him, looking over their shoulders to see Jonathan hanging another poster on the bulletin board by the school's side doors.

"You spending the night at Jonathan's again?" Barb teased. I shot her a dirty look, swatting at her arm.

"Oh, I knew it!" Tommy H. howled.

"You and Byers?" Steve laughed.

"His brother is missing," I said flatly.

"Hey, maybe Jonathan can come? Get his mind off things?" Nancy tried. Steve shook his head at her.

"I really doubt he would want to go, but thanks," I said.

"Thank god, we might go 'missing' too," Carol said under her breath.

"Excuse me?" I asked loudly.

"Dude, he's creepy," Tommy H. nervously laughed. "And so pathetic," Carol added. Steve laughed alongside them at Jonathan's expense.

"Alright, screw you guys..." I growled. I pushed past them, hearing them mocking me and him and calling me his girlfriend.

"Darcy, wait!" Nancy called after me, chasing me as I walked.

"Have fun with Harrington!" I yelled, grabbing Jonathan by the hand and storming through the school doors with him in tow. I dragged him all the way to his car before he yanked his hand back, swearing at me.

"Damn it, Darcy! What the hell?" he cried out. I opened the passenger side door and gave him a look. He quickly got into his side of the car, throwing his bag in the back seat. He started the car and began driving out of the school parking lot.

"Where exactly are we going?" he quietly asked.

"To look for Will," I said.

"Are you sure this car can make it?" I asked him nervously as we drove on the highway. His car violently shook as he pushed it faster and faster towards Indianapolis. In all the time that he's been driving it, I don't think it has ever gone this far in one trip or even gone this fast.

"You know, you like to crap on my car an awful lot for someone who can't even drive," Jonathan smirked, looking over at me for a moment before returning his eyes to the road.

"It's not my fault I'm fifteen!" I scoffed. "When I'm old enough, I'm making sure I get a car that can survive going over fifty miles an hour." We passed a sign stating that the next exit was to the city in a few miles. I could hear Jonathan inhale and hold his breath for a moment before merging lanes, the entire car violently shifting.

"Are you nervous to see him?" I asked tentatively. He stayed quiet, taking the exit. "I've never met your dad for as long as I've known you. You've always had me avoid him whenever he came around," I rambled. I never liked just sitting in silence; I always needed to be talking or have the radio playing or have the TV on.

"Remember how we met?" he asked suddenly, taking me by surprise.

"I like to block it out, but yeah," I admitted it, remembering. Dustin and I had moved to Hawkins four years ago, right before the school year started. When school started, Dustin instantly made friends; it's easy to do so in fourth grade. I was in the sixth grade, though, so it wasn't as easy. He asked to go over to one of his new friends' houses and I had to ride my bike over with him to make sure he made it safe. It ended up being Will's house, who's mom invited me in when she found out Dustin and I were new in town. She sort of forced

Jonathan to hang out with me that afternoon, and I just kept coming over whenever Dustin did until one day I started coming over on my own.

"Why do you block it out?" he laughed.

"Why wouldn't I? Your mom forced you to hang out with me and be my friend!" I cringed as I spoke. "Plus, I was the biggest mess! I had those awful, chunky glasses and those braces! Ugh, I was a total loser!"

"You were not! Maybe a little dorky, but..." he trailed off. "*But* your mom made you be my friend. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be sitting in this car with you," I told him. He stayed quiet as we pulled into the driveway of a small house. I could hear his breath pause as we stayed in the idling car.

"Are you sure about this?" I quietly asked, looking at him. I could see how tense he was with his furrowed brow and hunched shoulders. He nodded after a moment and got out of the car. He sped towards the front door of the house, me struggling to keep up behind him. He began pounding on the door, over and over again, trying to be heard over the loud music playing from inside. Suddenly, the door swung open and a slightly older blonde woman stood in front of us, wearing jeans and a light blue tank top.

"What?" she snapped at us. Jonathan instantly pushed past her, shoving her to the side. She yelled out as he passed her and began looking around the house. He rushed about, checking each room quickly.

"What the hell is going on?" she cried out, looking back at me now. Before I could answer, a loud crash came from behind the woman. Against the wall in the hallway, an older man was holding Jonathan against the wall. With the two face-to-face, you could see the similarities in their faces. After a second, though, Jonathan pushed back against the man, freeing himself.

"You've gotten stronger," the man chuckled.

"What the hell is going on?" the woman asked again.



"Cynthia, meet my oldest," the man, Jonathan's father, grinned.

"Where's Will?" I immediately asked. Lonnie chuckled again.

"You brought your girlfriend with you? How cute, she's a real cutie... No, I already told that pig, Hopper, that the boy isn't here," Lonnie said.

"Let me see for myself," Jonathan mumbled as he pushed past his father and went out through a back door in the kitchen. Lonnie trailed after him, only a step or two after him.

"I'm telling you, he's not here," the woman, Cynthia, told me. I rolled my eyes and looked around the messy living room, trying to find any sign of Will having been there. "He's cute, though, Lonnie's boy," Cynthia added.

"Stick to the Byers' you've already got," I growled at her as I continued looking. After another minute, Jonathan came storming back into the house with Lonnie behind him once again.

"I'm just saying, you should come by more often! Get out of that house with your neurotic mother... Bring your girlfriend by, too. I don't mind sharing," he smirked. Jonathan didn't respond to him; he only grabbed my arm and dragged me out of the house through the front door. I made sure to flip off the two of them before we made it outside.

"Jesus, Jonathan, what the hell happened?" I exclaimed, pulling my arm out of his grasp.

"Will wasn't here," he grumbled, getting into his car. I quickly got in too as he turned the car on and swiftly pulled out of the driveway, tires screeching, as he headed back to the highway towards Hawkins again.

He drove back into town, the sun setting as we got back. We went down Mirkwood, him pulling the car over and parking it by the woods where the police found Will's bike. Neither of us had really said anything since leaving Lonnie's. As soon as the car was parked and turned off, I climbed out of my side.

"Darce, wait," Jonathan called after me as I began walking into the woods. I turned around and he waved me back over. I went back to him, where he was in his trunk. He scrambled through the mess of what was in the back of his car until he pulled out two flashlights and his camera. He handed me one of the lights and leaned back against his car after shutting the trunk. I stepped up onto the car and sat on it, next to him.

"You know the cops already searched here, and the search parties," he sighed.

"Maybe they missed something," I tried.

"They're cops, Darcy. They know what to look for. We're just a bunch of teenagers," he said.

"Look, you know Will better than anyone who was out there looking for him. Maybe you'll see something they didn't know to even look for," I snapped, turning slightly away from him as my eyes teared up. This was the first time I had really started to cry over everything that had happened in the last two days; I didn't want him to see me cry over this. I shuddered as it got colder from the sun going down; its last few rays of light were still barely visible. Jonathan wrapped an arm around me and pulled me to face him.

"I'm fine!" I shouted, trying to pull away from his grip so he wouldn't see me crying. He grabbed me tighter, insisting on holding him. A moment passed of me trying to turn away until I just broke down into his shoulder, sobbing full on now. He fully turned towards me and wrapped his other arm around me, pulling tighter and shushing me as I cried.

"He's missing!" I sobbed, crying it out over and over again.

"Darcy," Jonathan whispered while he tried to calm me down. Finally, I stopped sobbing and pulled my head out of the crook of his neck. I looked at him and saw tears in his eyes, too.

"I know this is selfish, but..." I broke off, feeling bad for what I wanted to admit. I pulled away from Jonathan, but he kept his hand on mine. His eyebrows furrowed in curiosity like they were begging

me to continue.

"All I can think about is how it could've been Dustin. They both take that same road, it could've easily been my brother instead of yours," I admitted. He nodded his head, understanding. We continued to sit there without saying anything, watching the last of the sun go down for the day. He continued to hold my hand, rubbing his thumb back and forth.

"I haven't said it since you came yesterday, but, um... Thanks," he mumbled out.

"You'd do the same thing if Dustin was the one missing," I told him softly. I squeezed his hand and turned my head to look at him. Slowly, he leaned towards me, inching his face towards mine, I didn't breathe for a moment until a loud rustling in the woods caused us to both turn away from each other and look to the woods.

"Let's find Will," I said, getting up quickly from the car away from him. I turned on the flashlight and headed into the woods. I walked ahead of him, avoiding him while trying to process what the hell had just happened.

In the dark, we both trudged through the woods. I only spoke to him when I pointed something out., He'd take a picture of it, and then we'd just continue on further through.

"Darcy," he called out to me. I turned around expecting to see him pointing something else out to me. Instead, he was simply stopped in place and looking to me. I raised my arms up at him to ask what he wanted. He sighed, mumbling to himself to try and find words. Before he could get anything coherent out though, a scream pierced the air and caught our attention. Jonathan pushed past me, running towards where the noise had come from. I chased behind him, calling out his name and begging him to stop. We both ran until we had reached a break in the forest, greeted by the back of an oversized house. A pool with steam from its heat was in front of us, with several people standing around it.

Upon closing inspection, we could see Tommy H. holding onto Carol and threatening to push her into the pool. She screamed again as he

pushed her dangerously close to the pool's edge. Behind them was Steve, Nancy, and Barb standing around.

"Were you invited to this?" Jonathan whispered to me. They all stood closer together now. We could hear them talking but couldn't quite make out anything exact that they were saying. I nodded but shrugged at him.

"Not like I wanted to go to this anyways," I told him. His eyes remained fixated on the others at the pool, watching them as they talked and messed around, soon all jumping into the pool fully clothed.

"C'mon, let's just keep looking for Will," I pulled at his arm but he stayed firmly in place. Another few minutes went by and they all headed inside to dry off.

"This is seriously creepy, Jonathan," I joked, pulling at him again. Still, I couldn't move him. He began lifting his camera and aiming it towards the house, twisting the front of it to zoom.

"Jonathan, what the hell?" I exclaimed, continuing to pull at him. I could hear the soft *click* of his camera as he took a picture.

"Jonathan, what the actual hell? Watching is one thing but taking pictures?" I cried out again. He kept ignoring me, a few more *clicks* interrupting me.

"Take me home, seriously. Stop this," I demanded, but still nothing. Finally, I gave up on him and turned my back on him. I went back through the woods, grumbling to myself. I made it back to his car and grabbed my bag out of the back seat. Rather than wait for him to finish being a stalker, I left his car and made my way back to my own house.

### 3. Holly Jolly

Eventually, I made it back to my house. The walk home felt like it took forever, and the later it became, the colder it got outside. By the time I made it into my house, I could barely feel my fingers and toes. I had barely shut the door behind before I heard my mother shrieking.

"Darcy Alexandria, where have you been?" she came out from the hallway and came into the living room, wearing her nightgown and carrying Mews in her arms.

"Mom, look, I-" I started.

"I don't know what you were thinking! Did you know Dustin's friend went missing, that Will Byers? He's missing, something out there took that boy and now my only daughter is running around out there too? You could've gone missing, too! I had no clue where you were! Did you ever consider how worried I might have been?" she cut me off, her eyes swelling with tears. She put Mews down as she began pacing back and forth in front of me. Mews stayed close to her feet, slipping between her legs as my mother stepped.

"Mom-" I tried again.

"Heaven knows where that little boy is and heaven knows where you have been the last two days! I don't need you missing, either, Darcy!" she cried out, interrupting me again.

"Mom!" Dustin yelled over her. He stood in the doorway of the hall in his pajamas. "Look, don't yell at her. This is my fault," he calmly said as he approached her. She turned away from me, her expression softening as she faced him. Over my mother's shoulder, I made a confused face to him; he just shook his head at me as if to tell me to trust him.

"Dusty-poo, what do you mean?" she softly asked, caressing his cheek.

"Mom, Darcy *did* call the other night. You were already asleep, so I answered the phone. She told me she was staying at Jonathan's. I

just, I forgot to tell you. You know, with Will missing and all, it's been hard..." he trailed off, clearly guilt-ing our mother. I've seen him guilt our mother so many times now, it's easy for me to see right through it. However, our mom would always fall for it.

"Ohh, Dusty-kins, I am so sorry! Here I am, yelling about your missing friend without even thinking of you!" she wailed, pinching his cheeks. He pushed her hands away, but she just kept insisting and going back to his chubby cheeks.

"Mom, mom, it's fine. Seriously, Mom!" he backed away, pushing her off finally. She looked stunned for a moment before picking up Mews again.

"Oh, well, Darcy, sweetie, I'm sorry for yelling at you. Just, just try to let *me* know when you won't be home. Okay?" she consoled me, facing me now and putting her free hand on my cheek. I nodded and smiled weakly at her.

"Now, you kids have kept me up late enough! It is *way* past my bedtime! I'm going to bed, don't stay up too late," she teased, squeezing my cheek a little. She then went and kissed Dustin on the head, refusing to let him evade her, and then finally trailed off to her bedroom for the night.

"Thanks for that," I sighed to Dustin. I put my bag down on the couch and rubbed my hands together. I was only just starting to feel warm again. He nodded and I finally looked at him, really looked at him, since one of his best friends went missing. His eyes looked worn out with deep, dark bags under them. His hair was a mess but flat on top, probably from wearing his hat all day like he always does. Simply put, he looked tired.

"How are you holding up?" I asked him, moving closer to him. He mumbled incoherently and looked down at the floor to avoid eye contact with me, but I grabbed his face and pulled his face up from the ground. It was clear he was hiding something, which was unusual for him. We normally told each other everything. I repeated my question again, more firmly this time.

"Things are weird, off without Will. We're an incomplete party now,"

he managed out. I stayed quiet, knowing there was more to what he was telling me.

"No one even seems to care that he's missing, either! Everyone at school is saying he's dead already, but he's not!" he vented. I ruffled his messy hair and opened my mouth to speak, thinking that was it, but Dustin just kept going.

"Even Mike is distracted! He's obsessed with finding Will but gives all his attention to this girl-" he stopped short in his words. His eyes widened before he turned away from me, walking into the kitchen. He definitely didn't mean to share that with me.

"Wait, Mike likes a girl?" I teased, following him. This was the first time a girl had been mentioned in regards to him or any of his friends. I was surprised. He stayed quiet for a minute before lowering his voice to me.

"Darce, I swear; he's known her for five seconds and he's already in love with her! It's ridiculous!" he told me.

"Jeez, Mike has got the worst timing to get his first crush... Seriously, right when Will goes missing?" I thought out loud.

"I know! El-" he stopped again. Her name must be Elle or something like that. For some reason, though, I wasn't supposed to know her name yet.

"The girl is cool and all, awesome really. But she's distracting Mike and it's really pissing Lucas off!" Dustin spoke more slowly now, careful to choose his words so he didn't share too much with me.

"Oh god, it's starting," I said softly. Dustin's face hardened into confusion, not understanding what I meant.

"Listen, Dustin..." I leaned against the counter and nodded at the kitchen table to sit, which he did. "This was going to happen. You and Mike, and Lucas, and even Will were eventually going to start liking girls. I thought it would be a bit longer before that, and truthfully, I thought it would have been Lucas first, but what do I know? Mike likes a girl now and it's getting between you guys," I

explained to him. He focused on me as I spoke, hanging onto my words as I explained.

"As these girls come into your lives, and I know there will be plenty, you guys might fight over it. But please, listen to me: you *cannot* let these girls get between you all. Especially at this age, the girls you'll like are honestly meaningless. You guys have been friends for way too long to let any of this bullshit get between it," I said. He listened and chuckled when I finished talking.

"No, that won't happen, no way!" he laughed. I gave him a look.

"Dustin, you said it yourself... It's already happening," I said. His expression changed as the gears began turning in his head. He quickly realized I was right. I shrugged apologetically at him when he looked to me again until he turned away. I looked at the floor while waiting for him to speak again.

"So, uh... you and Jonathan?" he finally said, smirking at me. I rolled my eyes at him.

"I've slept over there plenty of times, you know that," I brushed him off.

"C'mon, when are you two going to finally just get together?" he continued to tease me. I scoffed at him.

"Dustin, he's my friend; my best friend. He's my Mike/Lucas/Will, you know?" I told him, pausing as I thought of what I had witnessed from Jonathan tonight. I still was creeped out by it, and I felt guilty for knowing.

"You said Lucas is mad about Mike being crazy about that Elle girl?" I asked my brother cautiously. He nodded while giving me a confused look, wondering why I was asking about it.

"Would you... Say Mike made a choice about the girl, something with her that you didn't agree with him on? Would you stop being his friend?" I questioned. I felt somewhat embarrassed going to my little brother for advice, but it's not like I had anyone else to go to about this.



"Didn't you just say we shouldn't let a girl come between us?" Dustin backtracked.

"Yes, I did... Okay, forget the girl. What if Mike decided one thing that you guys didn't agree with? Would you abandon him?" I tried again, hoping for an answer this time. Dustin was quiet, thinking, before answering

"If Mike made a decision that was against the party... We still stand by him no matter what. We might call him an idiot for that decision and fight with him about it, but we still stand by him," Dustin finally said carefully.

"Because he's your friend?" I said to him.

"Like you said... don't let any bullshit get between your friends, right?" Dustin smirked. I nodded and grinned back at him. I ruffled his hair again, making him laugh before he told me goodnight and headed to his room. I stood alone for a few minutes, thinking to myself, before following his suit and going to my room myself. I finally changed out of the old clothes I had been wearing for the past two days, put on clean pajamas, and crawled into my own bed to sleep in for the night.

In the morning, I somehow felt both well-rested and completely exhausted. I showered for the first time in what felt like forever, quickly got ready, and went off to school by myself. Dustin was already gone and I wasn't feeling all that hungry; just anxious. I wanted to talk to Jonathan today and find out what the hell was going through his head.

I made it to school a little earlier than first class in hopes of finding him. I pulled up to see his car in his usual spot, but him nowhere in sight. After putting my bike in the bike rack, I walked into the building still dazed and unsure of what to say to him. I was too into my own head to watch where I was going and ended up bumping into Nancy. My bag fell off my shoulder and spilled its contents, mixing with Nancy's books that had fallen from her arms. I looked to her and saw the same expression that I had on her own face; we were both looking for someone.

"Shit, Nance, I'm sorry!" I gushed out, scrambling to try and pack my own stuff back out to avoid talking to her. She was definitely in the photos Jonathan took of last night; a part of me felt obligated to tell her.

"No, no, it's fine. I'm distracted, I'm not paying attention, I can't... I can't find Barb. Have you seen her?" she asked, her voice slightly desperate. She looked at me as we both were kneeling on the ground, her eyes soft with concern.

"I haven't, I've been distracted too... I would've thought you'd be looking for Harrington," I mumbled. Somehow, I felt bad for knowing about the pictures as well as annoyed for all the comments about Jonathan yesterday. As gross as what he did was, maybe she didn't have to know.

"No, I just, I haven't seen her since last night," she confessed.

"Spent the night at Harrington's? Ditched Barb?" I spat out, still remembering what they had said.

"What? No, we just... No, Barb left the party first. Then I left later, alone," she defended herself, looking away from me. She always turned away when she was hiding something, but I admittedly didn't have time for her boy drama today; especially when that boy was Steve Harrington.

We finished gathering and separating our things and stood up. The bell rang, saving me from this conversation. I began to turn away, to head to class, before I turned around.

"Hey, if you see Jonathan, tell him I'm looking for him?" I shyly asked, feeling like a bitch for being mean to her when I was in a similar position. She nodded, before saying to me, "Same with Barb, okay?". I nodded back to her and finally walked off to first period, a few minutes late.

The first few classes went by slowly. I didn't pay attention in a single one; I was too busy thinking about what I was going to say to Jonathan when I found him. I knew he spent lunch in the photo lab, so I knew I'd be able to find him there soon. Once lunchtime came, I

ran out of class to find him.

I hurried to the art room and found the red light on above the doorway to the photo lab. I ignored it, and carefully opened the door just enough for my body to slip in without barely any light coming in. This meant going through quietly as well, so he didn't hear me come in. I tiptoed behind him, trying to see what he was developing. As I began to stand up and look over his shoulder, my bag fell off my shoulder and landed on the ground with a loud thud, scaring him and making him notice me.

"Jesus, Darcy!" he exclaimed, snatching up some of the photos he had been working on. All that he had left out for me to see were shots of the woods from when we were still looking for Will.

"Any good shots?" I lightly teased. He nervously looked away from me while he stuffed the secret pictures into his own bag. I looked over the tubs with the photos in them and saw he missed a handful. I could see Nancy, Steve, Tommy H., and Carol all in the pool in one shot, Barb sitting on the diving board of the pool alone in another, and in the last one was a shot of Nancy undressing through one of the windows upstairs in the house.

"What the-?" I whispered quietly, staring at the photos. My attention was pulled away, though, when someone else entered the darkroom. I recognized the bright red hair, even in the red light as a girl in Jonathan's grade named Nicole. I smiled politely at her as she said hello to us both. She peered over at the photos in the buckets, causing Jonathan to panic and grab the remaining photos and shove them into his bag before storming out of the room. Nicole looked at me, raising her eyebrows. She opened her mouth to speak, but I cut her off.

"I have class, I'll see you later," I said, my words stringing together while I grabbed my bag and pushed past her, leaving the room. When I reached the hallway, I looked for Jonathan. He was long gone, though.

For the remaining classes of the day, I couldn't find Jonathan anywhere. The worst part of me and him being a year apart is that he's in none of my classes, so I could only look for him during locker

breaks. He was obviously avoiding me, though. When the last bell of the day finally rang, I ran out of class and out to the parking lot to try and catch Jonathan before he left school.

His car was still parked in its spot, but standing around it was Steve, Tommy H, Carol, and Nicole from earlier. I felt my stomach drop at the sight of them all there, waiting for Jonathan. I knew something bad was about to happen. I saw Jonathan exit from one of the side doors of the school and rush towards his car, head down. He didn't notice them all standing there until he was only about ten feet away. I hurried behind him, trying to see what was going on.

"Heard you're quite the photographer, Byers," Steve said, crossing his arms and leaning against the car.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jonathan quickly sputtered out. He turned his body away from them so his bag was behind him.

"Aw, don't say that! Nicole here was telling me you got some really great shots," Steve said, reaching towards his bag. Jonathan tried pulling away to keep the bag from him, but Tommy came from the side and stole his bag. Tommy rifled through it, pulling out all of the photos that were developed today in the photo lab. Tommy handed them to Steve, stifling his laughter.

"Let's take a look, shall we?" Steve announced to the group as he began shuffling through the pictures.

"What's going on?" I chimed in.

"Uh oh, your girlfriend isn't going to like this, Johnny-boy," Tommy laughed. Carol handed me the photos as they were passed around, and I finally saw all of the pictures he had taken from the night before. Besides the few I had seen, there were more of Nancy undressing, her back turned as she was completely topless.

"I was looking for my brother," Jonathan tried, his head still facing the ground. He was avoiding looking at any of us.

"What, what is that?" I heard from behind me. Nancy had come out of the school doors and walked up to us to see what was going on. She

could see, over my shoulder, the photos. She grabbed them out of my hands, her cheeks turning red and she scanned them all and recognized herself.

"I was looking for Will," Jonathan repeated, his voice breaking slightly.

"No, this is called peeping. Being a stalker... Jesus, he even knows what he did is wrong," Steve mocked him, grabbing the piles of pictures from everyone. He then began to rip up the photos while stepping closer to him.

"Shut up, Harrington," I growled slightly. I stepped forward in between the two of them, blocking Steve from Jonathan.

"Wow, you need your girlfriend to defend you, Byers? She must really be brainwashed by you in order to stand by a creepy stalker... Perverts like you need to be punished, need their toy taken away," Steve threatened, backing away and grabbing Jonathan's bag from Tommy. He reached in and pulled out Jonathan's camera.

"Please, not my camera!" Jonathan pleaded, finally looking up and pushing past me towards Steve.

"Alright, alright, here you go, pervert," Steve offered the camera to Jonathan, extending his arm out to him. As Jonathan reached for the camera, it fell from Steve's fingertips and fell to the pavement, shattering as it hit the ground.

"Oops," Steve smirked as Jonathan looked at the mess of metal and plastic on the ground in horror. I felt my skin go hot as I bit my tongue in anger. Tommy, Carol, and Nicole laughed from behind Steve while he grinned at his handiwork. I couldn't help myself at the sight of his dumb, proud smile; Without thinking, I charged at him, hand clenching into a tight fist. I pulled my arm back, putting all my weight behind it, and punched his mouth as hard as I could manage. I heard my fist connect with his face, his grunt from the hit interrupting their laughter before he fell back against the car, clenching his mouth.

"Fuck you, Harrington!" I spat out as he stumbled to stand back up. I

went to charge at him again, but Jonathan was quickly standing again and holding me back.

"Jesus, Henderson, what the hell?" Steve cried out, holding his mouth where I hit him.

"You're defending him?" Nancy yelled.

"No! I just..." I breathed, unsure of what to say. Jonathan was definitely in the wrong here, but I could only think of what Dustin said about standing by your friends no matter what.

"What the hell is your problem?" Nancy kept yelling at me.

"My problem? What's been your problem?" I snapped back, finally fed up.

"What?" Nancy shouted, her face wrinkling in confusion at me.

"Ever since he stuck his tongue down your throat, you've been the absolute worst! You've barely talked to me, and you've gotten so bad that Barb has even been avoiding you! You've been a shitty friend for the last few weeks!" I roared. She opened her mouth to try and defend herself, but I kept going.

"You ditched your friends the second Harrington was interested in you. You're turning into one of his asshole lapdogs like Tommy and Carol!" I finally stopped yelling at her.

"You know what? Screw you guys!" Steve chimed in, stepping between me and her. I went to charge at him again and he stepped back in fear of being hit again. He stumbled back, caught himself, and turned around towards the school.

"C'mon guys, the game is starting soon anyways," he played off, gesturing to them to follow him. Tommy, Carol, and Nicole began walking after him while Nancy stood in place, staring at me with tears in her eyes and a stunned expression on her face.

"You coming, Nancy?" Steve yelled out to her. She looked back at him, and then at me.

"You're choosing him again?" I snarled. She continued to cry as she knelt down, picked up shreds of some of the pictures off the ground, and then ran after them. She looked back one last time before reaching Steve, who put her arm around her and walked their group back into the school.

"You just punched Steve Harrington," Jonathan chuckled softly, his expression completely shocked with his jaw dropped open.

"What the hell, Jonathan?" I finally turned on him, swatting at his arms. He had avoided me all day and I was ready to demand answers.

"I'm sorry!" he cried out, blocking my hands. He grabbed them both and held them so I couldn't hit him anymore. He looked at me, holding my arms by the wrists, and gave me a look. His expression softened, eyes tearing up at me. He knew how badly he had messed up. I nodded slowly to him and lowered my arms from his grip. I kneeled down and began picking up the shreds of the photos. He kneeled down, too, and picked at the pieces of the broken camera. Our eyes connected for a slight second before I looked away and smiled to myself. I let this go for now and made a mental note to get on his case about this later as we finished picking everything up from the ground before getting in his car to leave the parking lot.